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THE STORY OF THE BIRTH.

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The account of the birth in Matthew given to prove Jesus to be the Christ.— In Luke, to show the fulfilment of the promise of salvation.— The mutual relation of the two accounts.— Objections to the infancy narratives not strong enough to warrant disbelief.

THE story of the birth of Jesus is recounted in but two of the gospels. The objects with which Mark and John composed their narratives led them to begin with the public appearance of the Baptist, which immediately preceded the public ministry of Christ, without prefixing any account of the latter's earlier life. John, moreover, assumed familiarity with the other gospels. None of the gospels were written with what we would consider a biographical interest. The religious significance of the Lord's public work and teaching was so supreme to the earliest Christians, as is shown by Acts 1 : 21, 22, that it did not occur to the evangelists to treat his life as a whole from a merely historical point of view. But it did come within the purpose of Matthew and Luke to prefix to their gospels—which like the others dealt mainly with the public ministry of Christ—brief accounts concerning his birth and infancy; not, however, because these evangelists were, unlike the others, biographers, but because the earlier incidents which they have preserved contributed to the particular point of view from which they intended to set the public ministry forth. Luke indeed possessed no little historical insight, and in the Acts shows himself a real historical artist. It may be, therefore, that in beginning his gospel where he did, he was partly governed by the desire to present a complete narrative. This we may infer, also, from the language of his preface (1 : 3). But Matthew's gospel is proof that Luke's did not include all the facts, and his preface does not claim that it did.

We must still suppose that in the narrative of Christ's birth and infancy he was chiefly governed by that religious point of view from which he desired to exhibit the story of the Son of Man as a whole. The objects with which Matthew and Luke wrote were thus the occasion of their preserving the story of the birth, and to their narratives, with their noteworthy agreements and differences, must we go to learn it.

In Matthew's account the story of the birth and infancy of Jesus is obviously related for the purpose of showing that he was indeed the royal Messiah of Israel and the promised Son of David. This is the aspect in which he is predominantly represented in that gospel. So, in the first place, the legal genealogy of "Jesus who is called Christ" is traced through Joseph to David and Abraham, to whom the special promises had been made that from their seed Messiah should be born. This genealogical register is artificially arranged in three sections of fourteen generations each—from Abraham to David, from David to the captivity, and from the captivity to Christ—an arrangement intended partly as an aid to memory but also to emphasize the greatness of the epoch which began with the birth of Jesus. Christ's pedigree is here traced through Joseph because he was in fact Joseph's legal heir and therefore would naturally be understood to claim his Davidic rights through him. An examination of the genealogy shows that in other cases the inheritance did not descend by direct paternity, so that the phrase "begat" is used in a legal rather than in a physical sense.¹ The

¹ Thus Matthew, like Ezra 5:2, Neh. 12:1, Hag. 1:1, states "Salathiel begat Zorobabel;" though from 1 Chron. 3:19 we learn that the actual relation was that of uncle and nephew. Also, by a comparison with Matt. of Luke 3:27 and 1 Chron. 3:17, 18, it becomes quite certain that the phrase, "Jechonias begat Salathiel," means simply that Salathiel was the legal heir of Jechonias. This phraseology is in accordance with the largeness of meaning given by the Hebrews to the word "son." In v. 8 Matthew omits three kings, yet says "Joram begat Ozias (Uzziah)." A similar omission occurs in v. 11.

May not this suggest the explanation of the reading of the Lewis Syriac gospels which has recently excited discussion? Matt. 1:16 there reads "Joseph, to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin, begat Jesus who is called the Christ." This reading clearly did not imply unbelief in the miraculous birth, for the latter is immediately stated in the following verses. There is no probability that the Syriac reveals the existence of two original, divergent traditions, imperfectly amalgamated; for the evi-

whole point was to establish legal heirship. Therefore it did not in the least conflict with this representation, that Matthew immediately proceeds to narrate that Jesus was miraculously conceived by Mary before her marriage with her intended husband. But while stating the fact of the miraculous conception, Matthew's interest in the Davidic heirship of Jesus led him not merely to mention Mary's experience, but to relate at length Joseph's conduct when her condition became known. This "son of David" was warned by an angel not to fear to take Mary for his wife. He was told that the mystery of her conception was the work of the Holy Spirit and he was directed to call the child "Jesus," inasmuch as he would save his people from their sins. It was further pointed out to him by the angel¹ that the whole mysterious transaction was in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah (7 : 14). The words of the prophet, whether originally intended to refer to a virgin or simply to any young woman, were certainly most emphatically realized when a virgin was made the instrument of ushering into the world the promised Messiah; and in such an event, where God so obviously operated, special propriety lay in the name Emmanuel—God with us—which Isaiah had applied to the expected child. Thus Matthew's purpose was not to relate all the story. He rather assumed in his readers a knowledge of Christ's miraculous origin. His motive was to exhibit the legal royalty of Jesus and to adjust this, by explaining the

dence for our Greek text goes much further back than the Syriac and is abundantly attested. Neither can the variation have been due to heretical (Ebionite) intent; for v. 16 itself implies the orthodox view; no such intent can be shown elsewhere in the codex; and the omission from v. 25 of "he knew her not until," etc., evinces rather a disposition to protect the virginity of Mary. Neither can the reading of v. 16 be assigned to mere scribal error, for v. 21 also reads "she shall bear *to thee* a son" and 25, "she bore *to him* a son." The Syriac reading of v. 16 probably is to be traced, together with that of the Old Latin MS. (*k*) ("Joseph, cui desponsata virgo Maria genuit, Jesum Christum") to a Greek text slightly different from ours (*cf.* ZAHN, *Theolog. Literaturblatt* 18 Jan. 1895), which (*k*) translates perhaps literally. But that text, as well as the Syriac reading derived from it, appears to proceed on the idea that "begat" describes legal paternity and could be used where physical paternity was never thought of.

¹ The γέγονεν of v. 22 implies that we are to understand the language as that of the angel, not of the evangelist; though the latter adds the interpretation of the name Emmanuel. *Cf.* WEISS: *Matthäus Evangelium*.

fidelity and conduct of Joseph, to the fact of the Lord's supernatural generation. Then, to complete the account, it is added that Joseph took Mary to be his wife and reverently awaited with her the birth of the child. He indicated also his devout belief in the angel's message and in the high destiny of his heir, by giving him the significant name which the angel had directed. By the first evangelist, therefore, the story of Christ's birth was shown to agree fittingly with the Messianic claims which the subsequent narrative presents and illustrates. The events of the infancy also, as given by Matthew,—the visit of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, the slaughter of the children, the final settlement in Nazareth,—are all introduced for the purpose of exhibiting in them the fulfilments of prophecy pertaining to Messiah. His object was thus not to give a complete history of the birth of Jesus but to bring out the cogent proofs which it provided of the royal, Messianic dignity of Joseph's and Mary's child.

In Luke's gospel the story of the birth is given under the control, for the most part, of quite a different purpose. We have observed that Matthew refers briefly to the miraculous conception and is at no special pains to prove it, as if it were a fact well known among his readers. The longer narrative of Luke provides the information to which Matthew thus alludes. It may reasonably be inferred that the third evangelist derived his material in this instance from the family circle in which the events occurred, with one member of which we know that he was acquainted (Acts 21:18). From that family it may be supposed to have circulated among the Hebrew Christians. The strongly Hebraistic coloring of this section seems also to imply that Luke found it already in written form.¹ At the same time the evangelist appears to have added some explanatory clauses to fit the narrative for Gentile readers (*e. g.*, 1:5, 9; 2:1, 2, perhaps 23). The beautiful story, however, bears on its face the evidence that it issued from just some such circle of pious Jews as that which Matthew depicts in the characters of Joseph and Mary. In it we feel ourselves far from the worldly priestcraft,

¹ See FEINE, *Eine vorkanonische Ueberlieferung des Lukas*, 1891.

formal ceremonialism, and political ambitions which ruled in Jerusalem, and which arrayed themselves in fierce opposition to Jesus when his public ministry began; far removed, also, from the fanatical patriotism of the common people, which was so devoid of spiritual motives that it could not understand Jesus even while it admired him. We find ourselves in an atmosphere of devoted piety, of intense longing for the promised Saviour of Israel; in a circle where Old Testament words and ideas nourished the spiritual life. The language of Zacharias and Elizabeth, of Mary, Simeon, and Anna, does not indeed transcend the point of view from which devout Hebrews would be expected to conceive of the Messiah. But they reveal such scriptural piety, formed after the Old Testament pattern, as became the household from which the Christ and his forerunner were to spring. The narrative thus bears striking marks of historicity. Its fine religious realism is itself strong assurance of its historical truthfulness.

In this narrative, then, the birth of Jesus appears as the event in which the promise of salvation, long deferred to Israel, began to be fulfilled. The goodness and grace of God in at last providing redemption seems to be the leading motive of the recital. We notice the stress laid on the gladness of the tidings brought by the angel to Zacharias. They emphasize the joy which John the Baptist's appearance would cause; his spiritual character; the revival of piety of which he would be the instrument; his position as forerunner of the Lord himself. Then in Gabriel's annunciation to the Virgin the message of salvation is still more strongly stated. The maiden's natural fear at the appearance of the angel is met by the assurance of God's favor to her. The same significant name "Jesus" was revealed to her also as that which should be given to her child, while his dignity ("Son of the Highest") and his everlasting reign were predicted in terms fitted to no mere worldly monarch, but only applicable to one who would possess primarily a religious and spiritual dominion. The religious import of the event is also emphasized in the explicit statement by which the angel explained to Mary the holy nature of the mystery that should

take place. It was to be the work of the Holy Spirit, of whom the Old Testament had spoken as the powerful agent of God's grace in the theocracy, and of whose special bestowment on Messiah Isaiah had repeatedly testified (Isa. 11:1, etc.; 42:1, etc.; 61:1, etc.); so that the promised child would be in a unique sense "holy, the Son of God." We should carefully observe that Mary was not told that her child was to be incarnate God. The phrase "Son of God" is undoubtedly used in a theocratic sense. There is not a suggestion in the narrative of later theological statement. The story remains strictly in the bounds of such religious ideas as were possible to a devout Hebrew. The main thought of the narration is the gracious fulfilment of the promised salvation. Apart from the question of the miraculous character of the events described,—a question which has no right to intrude into our study,—the annunciation to the Virgin is described in a way exactly harmonious with the intense spiritual aspirations and actual religious ideas which Mary may most naturally be supposed to have had.

And Mary is described as accepting her lot in the same exalted fervor of devotion. When her natural modesty and need of sympathy led her to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, of whose expected motherhood the angel had also informed her, their salutations evince the lofty and pure thoughts which filled their souls. Where was it more natural for the long silent voice of inspiration to break forth again than from the lips of these holy women, who had been chosen for the two highest honors of their race? In particular, the outburst of Mary's praise in the *Magnificat*, by its close reproduction of Old Testament psalmody, and especially by its echoes of Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:1-10), testifies to the direction in which her mind was turning, and ought to confirm our confidence in the historical character of the record. A like remark may be made concerning the song of Zacharias at the birth of John, which moves wholly in the sphere of Israelitish ideas and repeats the thought that the promised salvation was at hand.

We are thus brought to Luke's account of the actual birth of Jesus (2:1-20). It is characteristic of the evangelist that he

relates the events to secular dates (see 1:5; 3:1). He thus explains that, through the decree of Augustus that all the world should be enrolled, the birth occurred in Bethlehem, and adds, again quite after his manner, "this was the first enrolment made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria." As is well known, Luke's accuracy in this statement has been vigorously attacked, most exhaustively perhaps by Schürer.¹ It would take us far beyond the limits and purpose of this article to discuss the question in detail. We believe, however, that every objection made by Schürer may be successfully met, and it is gratifying to note that so high an authority as Professor W. M. Ramsay is of the same opinion.² Apart from that question, however, Luke's narrative calls for further remark. He, too, like Matthew, represents Joseph as of Davidic lineage, though it is probable, from 1:32, that Mary also was of like descent. He describes briefly the circumstances of the birth, mentioning the fact that it occurred in a stable because there was no room for them in the lodging-house. But, true to the prevailing motive of the entire section, he hastens to narrate at greater length the annunciation to the shepherds, since in it the message of the fulfilment of the promised salvation was again repeated. This, therefore, was evidently the governing thought under the influence of which the whole narrative was written. It corresponds with the leading thought of the following gospel. The latter makes conspicuous the grace of God which was brought unto men through Jesus Christ³ and the keynote of this evangel of grace is struck in its opening recital of the birth of Jesus.

These two gospels therefore recite the story of the birth of Christ, not for the purpose of giving complete accounts, but with the aim of selecting those events which contributed to their recital of his public life. Yet, when their narratives are compared, no contradiction exists between them. It is sometimes alleged, indeed, that Matthew makes Joseph a resident of Bethlehem and

¹ *Hist. of Jewish People*, etc., Eng. Tr. Div. I, Vol. II, 105-143.

² *Expositor*, September 1896, p. 198. Cf. also ZAHN, *Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, 1893, 8.

³ See Bishop ALEXANDER's *Leading Ideas of the Gospels*, IV.

his later settlement in Nazareth only the result of his fear of Archelaus. But this is a needless interpretation. Matthew simply does not state where Joseph was when the annunciation was made to him. After Jesus was born, it would be most natural for the parents to assume that their child should be raised in the city of his father David whose throne he was to inherit. Hence their intention of returning from Egypt to Judea is easily understood. But when it was made evident that God wished them not to return thither, they naturally sought the Galilean town where, as Luke informs us, they had previously resided. Neither is Luke 2:39 exclusive of the sojourn in Egypt, although it is probable that the visit of the Magi and the flight which followed should be located after the presentation in the temple. Still less should objection be raised to the double annunciation of the birth or to the statements that both to Joseph and Mary the name "Jesus" was given by the angels to the Child. Both Joseph and Mary equally needed a revelation on the subject. The two gospels therefore harmonize in their details and agree in the larger facts of the Davidic heirship of Jesus, his miraculous conception, and his birth in Bethlehem. Their differences are fully explicable by the purposes of the writers, which led to the selection of different incidents with a view of presenting special aspects of the events.

At the same time these narratives are obviously independent. Their agreement, therefore, proves that the facts, as gleaned from them both, were the common belief of the apostolic Christians. We have already observed that neither evangelist is at pains to prove or to elaborate the facts but only to exhibit their religious significance. This indicates that the facts themselves were accepted in the apostolic age without dispute. The entire absence from both narratives of such fanciful details as appear even so early as in the epistles of Ignatius¹ (A. D. 110), and still more in the apocryphal gospels, further assures us that we are not dealing with the products of pious imagination but with the sober testimony of the earliest period. Moreover, the Jewish Christian origin of both accounts is evident. The story, there-

¹ *Ep. to the Ephesians*, 19.

fore, cannot be regarded as a legend due to the influence of Gentile ideas upon Christian tradition. It must be accepted as part of the original apostolic testimony: and since the notion of a God-begotten man was utterly foreign to Jewish thought,¹ the Jewish Christian origin of the narratives becomes a cogent evidence of their historical value. The suggestion, *e. g.*, of Holtzmann,² that the legend arose out of an Essenic antipathy to marriage, is utterly incredible, first, because these very gospel narratives conspicuously honor marriage, and, secondly, because in the Old Testament, whose influence appears so strong throughout the story, marriage and offspring were regarded as an honor to Hebrew women. Finally, the incorporation of the story in Luke's gospel attests that it was also the common belief of Gentile Christians too. The preface to that gospel assures us that the evangelist believed himself to be introducing no novelties. He desired to give Theophilus a full and orderly account of the things in which the latter had already been instructed. Hence there should be no hesitation in admitting that among the apostolic Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, the belief in the facts concerning the birth of Jesus, as these are given in our gospels, was general.

With that class of objections to the gospel story of Christ's birth which arises from disbelief in the miraculous, we are not here concerned. Such criticism is to be met on philosophical, rather than historical, grounds. But objections to the story are often drawn from the silence elsewhere upon this subject of the New Testament itself. We are reminded, for instance, that Christ never alluded to his miraculous birth or to his birth in Bethlehem, though both would have been reasons for believing in him as Messiah. He was known as the Nazarene, and the Carpenter's Son (Matt. 13:55; Luke 4:22; John 1:45). The earliest disciples betray no knowledge of the story of his birth (John 1:45); neither do the people of Nazareth (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; Luke 4:22) nor of Galilee in general (John 6:42),

¹ See STANTON'S *Jewish and Christian Messiah*, p. 377. DRUMMOND'S *Jew. Mess.*, p. 294.

² *Hand Kommentar*.

nor the people at Jerusalem (John 7 : 27), nor their rulers (John 7 : 42-52). In explaining his power he never appealed to his miraculous birth, but to the spirit with which he was filled (*e. g.* Matt. 12 : 28), or to the Father who was with and in him (John 5 : 36 ; 14 : 10). Still farther, the language and conduct of his mother and family have been deemed inconsistent with the story of his birth. Mary's surprise when she found him in the temple (Luke 2 : 48); still more her apparent interruption of his work (Mark 12 : 46); the belief of his friends that he was beside himself (Mark 3 : 21), and the unbelief of his brethren in his Messiahship (John 7 : 5) appear to some incompatible with knowledge of his miraculous birth or of the angelic annunciations with which it is said to have been attended. But it may be said in reply that any public appeal by Jesus for faith on the ground of his birth would have been useless as well as injurious to the chief purpose of his ministry; useless, because none would have believed it, and it would only have aroused the tongue of slander to impeach his mother as well as himself; injurious, because his determined purpose was to evoke a faith based on sympathy with his ethical and religious teaching, not on mere wonder at his miraculous deeds. The latter, indeed, were credentials, but not because of their miraculous character alone, but because of their ethical character also (see, *e. g.*, Matt. 12 : 24-32 ; John 10 : 24-26). It would therefore have been wholly out of keeping with his method to have appealed to a fact which not only was not a public one but was one whose religious significance only appears in the light of a complete knowledge of his person and work. As to his mother, we are expressly told that she "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2 : 19). The child's life of quiet obedience fully accounts for her surprise at finding him in the temple, and her very awe over his origin, combined with the evident mystery that attended his mission as well as with the dangers that had threatened him in his infancy, would lead her and Joseph to preserve their secret in silence, not speaking of it at first even in the family circle itself. There is nothing whatever to show that Mary ever doubted his Messiahship. Her language at the wedding at Cana (John 2 : 3, 5) distinctly implies

the contrary. On the other hand, the claim of Davidic sonship appears universally known; since this rested, as Matthew shows, on his being known as Joseph's son and heir.

But we are further reminded that according to the Acts and the epistles, the apostles, when the time for the preaching of Jesus came, do not appear ever to have alluded to his miraculous birth or to his birth in Bethlehem; still less do they appeal to it; while the rise of the legend can be explained, it is said, on dogmatic grounds. It may be questioned, indeed, whether the language of Paul, "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4), especially when taken in connection with the following phrase, "made under the law," does not imply familiarity with the narrative given in Luke of Christ's birth and infancy; but we are not anxious to press the point.¹ It is sufficient to observe that neither in their preaching, any more than in that of Christ himself, was the story of his birth fitted to serve the purpose of proof of his Messiahship. That needed a public fact, attested by witnesses, and this was found in his resurrection. Neither was it the purpose of the epistles to relate the story of his life. The allusions in them to his deeds on earth and even to his teaching are comparatively few. It implies, therefore, an entire misapprehension of the purposes and needs of apostolic testimony, and is an unwarrantable use of the argument from silence, to discredit the narratives of the evangelists by the absence of reference elsewhere to their story of Christ's birth.

Nor can the rise of the story be fairly attributed to dogmatic tendencies. We have already observed that its Jewish Christian origin precludes the explanation of it as a myth. Its rise out of dogmatical influences likewise cannot be shown. Here the silence of the epistles does become significant. The only known dogmatic tendencies which could have produced the story, were desire to establish the divinity of Christ, or his sinlessness, or Paul's doctrine of the second Adam. But these doctrines are maintained and defended in the epistles without any reference to the miraculous birth and wholly on other grounds. There is, therefore, absence of proof, just where proof

¹ See also Rev. 13:1, etc.

might be expected, that belief in these doctrines led to the construction of the evangelic story. That story, as we glean it from the first and third evangelists, carries us back historically to the heart of the apostolic age, and has no reasonable explanation except that it records the general belief of the apostolic Christians. It would seem to be only the fair conclusion that, in this matter as in regard to other incidents of Christ's life, their belief rested, as Luke expressly says his did, on the testimony of those who "from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word."

But must we not admire the delicacy of touch with which the outlines and principal features of the story are recorded? There is no coarse attempt to satisfy vulgar curiosity. There is no effort to portray the miracle in glaring colors or with fantastic detail. The permanent, religious value of the facts is kept in the foreground. Yet how appropriate is the setting of the story! If the lowly surroundings of the Child of Bethlehem befitted his mission as the Son of Man and Man of Sorrows, so the royalty of his inheritance and the homage of angels and wise men befitted his kingship, and the glowing piety of the circle amid which he was ushered into the world befitted his holy character and position as the promised Redeemer of Israel. Where was it appropriate for Messiah to be born except in the bosom of a household where the old revelation maintained its power? And yet he was not the product of that household nor of Israel. He was not merely the perfect fruit of Hebrew faith and culture. He was more. He was incarnate God, who himself assumed a human nature. What then was more appropriate than that his entrance into flesh should be supernatural; that even the piety of Israel should be made to appear insufficient to produce him; that he who was afterwards to be known as the God-man should combine in the very manner of his birth the indications of his heavenly as well as of his earthly origin?